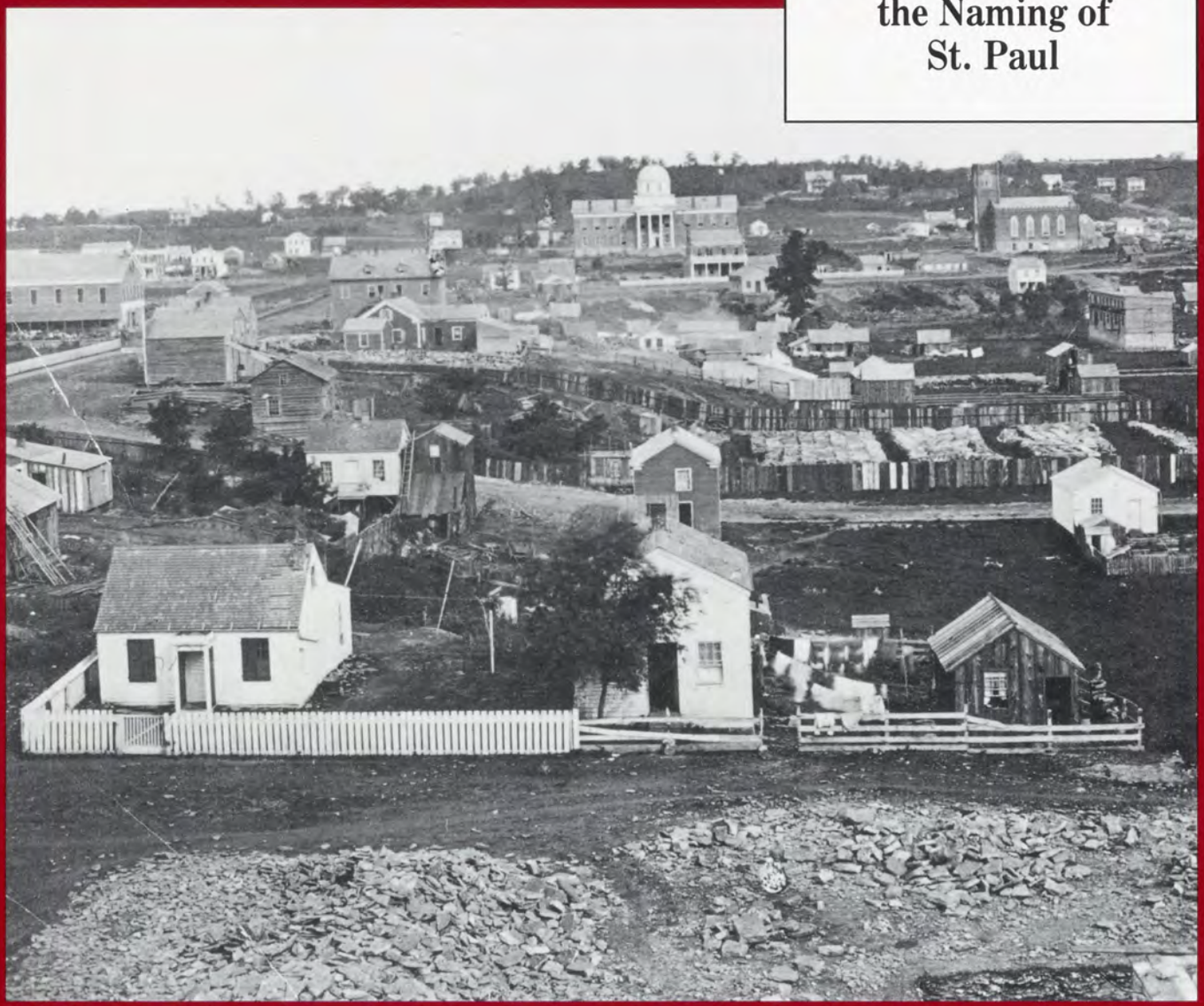
RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Fall, 1991
Volume 26, Number 3

Special Issue:
150th Anniversary of the Naming of St. Paul



St. Paul in 1857. This is one of nine panoramic views shot that year by B. F. Upton from the roof of the Ramsey County Courthouse at Fourth and Wabasha streets. In this view to the north, the building with the pillars and the dome is the territorial capitol at Tenth and Wabasha streets. The articles beginning on page 4 are published in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the naming of St. Paul and trace the early history of the settlement on the Mississippi that once was known as Pig's Eye.

Ramsey County History is published quarterly by the Ramsey County Historical Society, 323 Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55102. Printed in U.S.A.
 ISSN Number 0485-9758.

On the Cover: St. Paul was the capital of the Territory of Minnesota, when this view was photographed by B. F. Upton from the roof of the Ramsey County Courthouse in 1857. See articles on St. Paul's early years beginning on page 4.

Acknowledgements: The photograph on page 3 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society's photo collection. The map on page 10 was created by the design firm of Rummel, Dubs and Hill. Photographs of the Davern house in 1990 on page 23, the Daverns on page 24, Dr. Colvin on page 27 and the Colvin house on page 28 are from the author's collection. The Fuller family photograph on page 25 is from the H. B. Fuller Company. All other photographs in this issue are from the audio-visual collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie, Jr.

A Message from the Editorial Board

Four members of the Society's Board of Directors and Editorial Board have had the good fortune to serve on the St. Paul History Sub-committee for the writing of *Saint Paul – The First 150 Years*. The sub-committee came together under the auspices of The Saint Paul Foundation to assist the book's author, Virginia Brainard Kunz, with comment and criticism of her manuscript that celebrates the history and cultural diversity of the people of St. Paul. The opinions of the committee members were as varied as their ethnicity. The group included representatives from the Native American, Southeast Asian, African American and Mexican American communities of Ramsey County, as well as those of European ancestry.

The book that Virginia Kunz wrote reflects the experiences of their people and their vision for St. Paul and its cultural richness. Featured in this issue of *Ramsey County History* is a section of the book along with special articles on "Pig's Eye" Parrant, Abraham Perry's family and the Davern house, an early farm house set within an Irish community in what is now Highland Park. Together they all contribute to the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the naming of St. Paul.

–John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Forgotten Pioneer
Abraham Perry and the Story of His Flock

Patrick R. Martin

The stories of an almost forgotten pioneer, who arrived in the New World in the 1820s, and his descendants are part of the rich history of Minnesota and Ramsey County. They are stories, not just of these sturdy men themselves but of their families; of how they persevered through hardship and change and how they form an important link, down the generations, between themselves and the rest of us.

Abraham Perry was my maternal great great great grandfather. He came to unsettled land and made a living, despite the wide array of calamities that befell him. He was among the first white settlers of Minnesota and St. Paul. His son, Charles, was a peaceful, prosperous farmer who exchanged what he felt was the bustle of frontier St. Paul for the calmer shores of Lake Johanna. He became, in the process, the first settler of what is now Arden Hills. Charles' son, William, tried his hand at several pursuits before opening a successful resort, Perry's Beach.

Their story begins in a French-speaking Swiss valley where Abraham Perret (later Anglicized to Perry) was born in 1776. He was a watchmaker and a family man with three children and little inclination, it might seem, to venture to the New World. Then he learned of the Selkirk Colony, which had been founded in 1812 at Fort Garry, near present-day Winnipeg, Manitoba, by a Scottish nobleman.

Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk, and a large stockholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, had a somewhat Utopian dream of providing homes for poor immigrants, many of them Scottish crofters but others as well, who would grow food for the company's traders. He established his colony at the junction of the Red and Assinboine Rivers. It was ironic that he wanted his settlers to be peaceful farmers in a region caught in the middle of a bitter fur trading war between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Fur Company.

Back in Switzerland, Abraham Perry decided in 1820 to join a new group journeying to Lord Selkirk's colony. He, his wife, Mary Ann, and their three children set sail from Marseilles, France, and traveled to Canada by way of the treacherous Hudson Bay route. Arriving at Fort Garry, he began farming a few miles south of the Canadian border at what is now Pembina, North Dakota.

Although he left Switzerland with the hope that he would prosper as a farmer, nothing could have been less likely. He and his fellow settlers had been artisans back in Switzerland but their craft had not prepared them to farm in a land where nature could be harsh. Hardships such as early frosts, grasshopper plagues, and mice that devoured their crops kept the colonists barely above subsistence level. In addition, the Northwest Company resented interference with their lucrative fur trade and continually harassed them. The final blow came when a disastrous flood struck the colony in 1826 and ruined their crops. The following spring, the Perrys and other families left on the long trek south to Fort Snelling. The six-month exodus first followed the Red River southward, then the Minnesota River to its junction with the Mississippi where the fort stands.

Colonel Josiah Snelling, commandant at Fort Snelling, allowed the Selkirkers to establish small farms on the military reservation on the west bank of the Mississippi and north of the fort. In actuality, they were squatters on the reservation, with no legal claim to their plots of land. Perry settled at Cold Water Spring where he grew corn and potatoes. He had brought some cattle south with him and these he developed into the largest herd in the area, with the exception of that of fur trader Joseph Renville.

As Perry's herd grew, so did his family which now had six girls and one boy. Not surprisingly, he became known as the patriarch of the Fort Snelling settlers. Mary Ann Perry became an accomplished *accoucher* (midwife) for the women at the fort. By 1837, 157 squatters were making their homes on the military reservation. The new commander at the fort, Major Joseph Plympton, did not look upon these French-speaking settlers as favorably as had Colonel Snelling. He saw them as intruders competing for important resources such as firewood and forage, and he wanted them off the government land. A number of them also were selling liquor to the soldiers and to the Native Americans in the region, which further soured relations between the civilians and the military.

Finally, a wrathful Major Plympton charged Perry and the other farmers with allowing their cattle to trespass on the fort grounds. The colonel ordered them to leave the reservation. Alarmed at having to move from land which they had improved and where they had prospered, Perry and others took their problem to President Martin Van Buren.

In a letter they stated respectfully that they believed the land on which they had settled to be included in the treaty Lieutenant Zebulon Pike had made with the Dakota in 1805 for the purpose of establishing Fort Snelling and possible settlement. The settlers, they further stated, had made improvements upon the land and they asked that "a reasonable and just allowance be made us . . . for our improvements." Their appeal was forwarded to Congress where, predictably, it was buried forever in committee.

Inevitably, Perry and his fellow settlers were forced to leave. They moved to the east side of the Mississippi and settled down the river from the fort at Fountain

Cave, located at the approximate site today of Shepard Road, Barton and Randolph streets. It was a location they fervently believed to be outside the boundaries of the military reservation. They were wrong. And it was there that they encountered Pierre "Pig's Eye" Parrant, who already had taken up a claim at the mouth of the cave.

Trouble began to brew at the Fountain Cave settlement almost as soon as the Perry family arrived. On June 9, 1838, a group of Dakota from the village at Kaposia arrived at Fort Snelling. They complained that Perry and Parrant had settled at Fountain Cave before ratification of the 1837 treaty opening land on the east side of the Mississippi to white settlement. They also complained that Parrant had sold them liquor.

"Pig's Eye" Parrant was a sharp contrast to his neighbor, Abraham Perry. A former fur trader who had lost an eye in a knife fight, Parrant had gone into the liquor business at Fountain Cave. He would continue to be an irritant to the authorities at Fort Snelling and his business, which included a lively clientele of soldiers at the fort, one more reason for another move the settlers would have to make.

Further trouble from the Indians came on September 16, 1838, after which Mary Ann Perry and her son, Charles, ventured to Fort Snelling to complain of an attack on their farm. The Indians apparently had intended to kill the Perrys but were somehow dissuaded and killed three cattle instead.

Despite the turmoil, the Perrys and other French-speaking families held gatherings and dances that often led to romance. It was a one such dance in 1839 that Abraham's daughter, Rose, met James Clewett.

Adele, another Perry daughter, married Vetal Guerin. Abraham Perry had many descendents and, not surprisingly, became known as "the Abraham of Hennepin County," even though his last years were spent in what is now Ramsey County. His other daughters also married men who were instrumental in the settling and development of Ramsey and Hennepin counties: Charles Mousseau, Charles Bazille, J. B. Cornoyer and Pierre Crevier.

In 1840 Major Plympton extended the military boundaries of Fort Snelling to include the Foundation Cave location, the land upon which the Perrys and other settlers now lived. The families were again ordered to move. Military authorities said later that despite several days' notice, they ignored the order and military force was necessary. On May 6 Perry and his family were peacefully planting their garden when a detachment from the fort appeared. Deputy United States Marshal Ira B. Brunson presented an eviction notice which Perry, although he understood only French, realized meant the end of his stay there. He looked on helplessly while the soldiers carried out his belongings, then destroyed his home.

Charles and Angelina Perry. The son of Abraham Perry, Charles Perry was the last survivor of the Selkirk Colony refugees.

Henry H. Sibley wrote later that Brunson and the soldiers "fell upon [the settlers] without warning, treated them with unjustifiable rudeness, broke and destroyed furniture wantonly, insulted the women . . . [and] killed cattle." Perry gathered up all that remained and went to live with James and Rose Clewett. Before long, however, his health began to deteriorate and finally he became partially paralyzed, although he was still strong enough to chop down trees while sitting down. He died in May of 1849 at the age of seventy-three.

His son, Charles, would live a more fruitful life. Born on March 20, 1816, he came to the Selkirk Colony with his family as a little boy. He made the move with them to Fort Snelling. A young man by the 1840s, he carried mail on foot between Fort Snelling and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. In 1846, six years after his family's eviction from the military reservation, Charles Perry returned to the Fountain Cave area and farmed for a short time.

Next, he took up a 160-acre claim on a lake he named after Lake Como in Italy. For a year he raised cattle on land that later became Como Park, but he decided to move again because his "neighbors were becoming too thick and interfered with his cattle-raising."

In 1849 Charles settled at Lake Johanna. After the government surveyed the area, Charles filed a claim for eighty-nine acres along the lake's north and west shores. That same year he married Angelina Morisette from Montreal. It was the second marriage for both. Her first husband had drowned three days after their wedding and Charles' first wife, an Indian woman, had died after bearing three children. Charles and Angelina had fifteen children.

At Lake Johanna, ten miles north of St. Paul in what is now Arden Hills, Charles raised cattle and grew potatoes. He became involved in local politics and, when Mounds View Township was organized, he was elected to the post of supervisor. His life was simple and serene. Janet Newham, in her report on the "History of Mounds View Township," states that he could hear the Falls of St. Anthony, ten

miles distant, from his home.

An account of his life in *Pen Pictures and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers of St. Paul,* published in 1902, expresses the interesting opinion that, although he had left the city before its rapid growth, he was "certainly better off than he would have been if he had owned half the land upon which Saint Paul now stands, for he has escaped a vast amount of vexatious and untiring labor."

The Mdewakanton band of the Dakota had their hunting grounds near Lake Johanna. Chief Little Crow, famous for his role in the Dakota Conflict of 1862, had at times lived on the lake's island, according to historian and writer Gene Skiba. The Perry children often went on excursions with the Dakota, who always saw them safely home. Because of his friendship with them, Charles Perry was given a ceremonial knife sheath which has been handed down in the Perry family.

Charles and Angelina Perry celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at a gala event with eighty of their descendents present. At his death on April 24, 1904, at the age of eighty-eight, Charles was the oldest original settler of Ramsey County. His obituary described him as "a very prosperous farmer," but his prosperity extended beyond monetary wealth. He had lived a long and quiet life, free from the rigid constraints of society, in a land in which he was content. Charles Perry Park, established on the site of his original homestead, honors him.

William Perry, who became a man of colorful and enterprising character, was born on December 7, 1869, and grew up at Lake Johanna. From 1886 to 1893 he bounced around the state, attending school and working as a charcoal burner and a conductor on the Minneapolis streetcars. In 1893 he settled down in New Brighton, near his parents' home, to raise pickles. Soon after this, his father, Charles, hit upon an idea that would make William a well-known and successful public figure.

In the early 1890s, the Perrys became known for throwing large celebrations and for being great entertainers. In 1892 a newspaper reported a successful party, hosted by the Perrys, during which sixty couples danced until early in the morning. The same issue carried an announcement for another party, "Perry's Ball," to which all New Brighton residents were invited.

William and his brothers also ran a "blind pig" at Lake Johanna, meaning that they sold liquor illegally. Whenever the Ramsey County sheriff's department planned a raid, the family story goes, they would tip off George Perry, William's brother, to hide the liquor. Out of this slightly shady beginning, however, a successful and well-patronized resort arose.

Rose Perry Clewett, with her son. She was the heroine of a frontier romance. *(See page 5.)*

In 1898 the "blind pig" developed into a resort under the guidance of Charles and William Perry. They named it "Perry's Beach." In the early years, William used a horse-drawn bus to bring people to the resort. Word of the Beach spread to northeast Minneapolis, drawing hundreds of visitors. Its popularity was so great that eventually the resort outgrew the number of people it could handle. William's son, Harvey, remembers his father standing in the road and waving people off when the Beach was filled to its limit. Because of the problems large crowds can create, William was deputized to keep the peace.

In an 1989 interview with the writer, Harvey Perry described the layout of Perry's Beach. Popcorn, pop, ice cream, peanuts and other snacks were sold from a stand at the water's edge. Behind this stood a lunchroom that William would rent out each year. At the bathhouse, beachgoers could rent a towel for a dime and a swimsuit for a nickel. After each use, swimsuits and towels were run through a hand-operated wooden washing machine. William's children had to keep the picnic grounds in order. Despite the clutter on the shore, Lake Johanna's sparkling waters were the true source of entertainment at Perry's Beach. William owned twenty-four boats that fishermen rented by the hour. Each spring the Perrys repaired the boats, caulking, painting and replacing old ribbings. William also owned a high diving board, a low diving board, a large slide, a small slide and a water swing.

Ida Demars, whose family had come from Quebec, married William Perry on October 20, 1903. They had five boys, Archie, Harvey, Ralph, Derral and Wallace, and four girls, Stella, Alice, Eleanor and Genevieve. His children, most of whom remained in the community, were described by writer Gene Skiba as "active, interested, well-liked, treasured people of high principles . . . ."

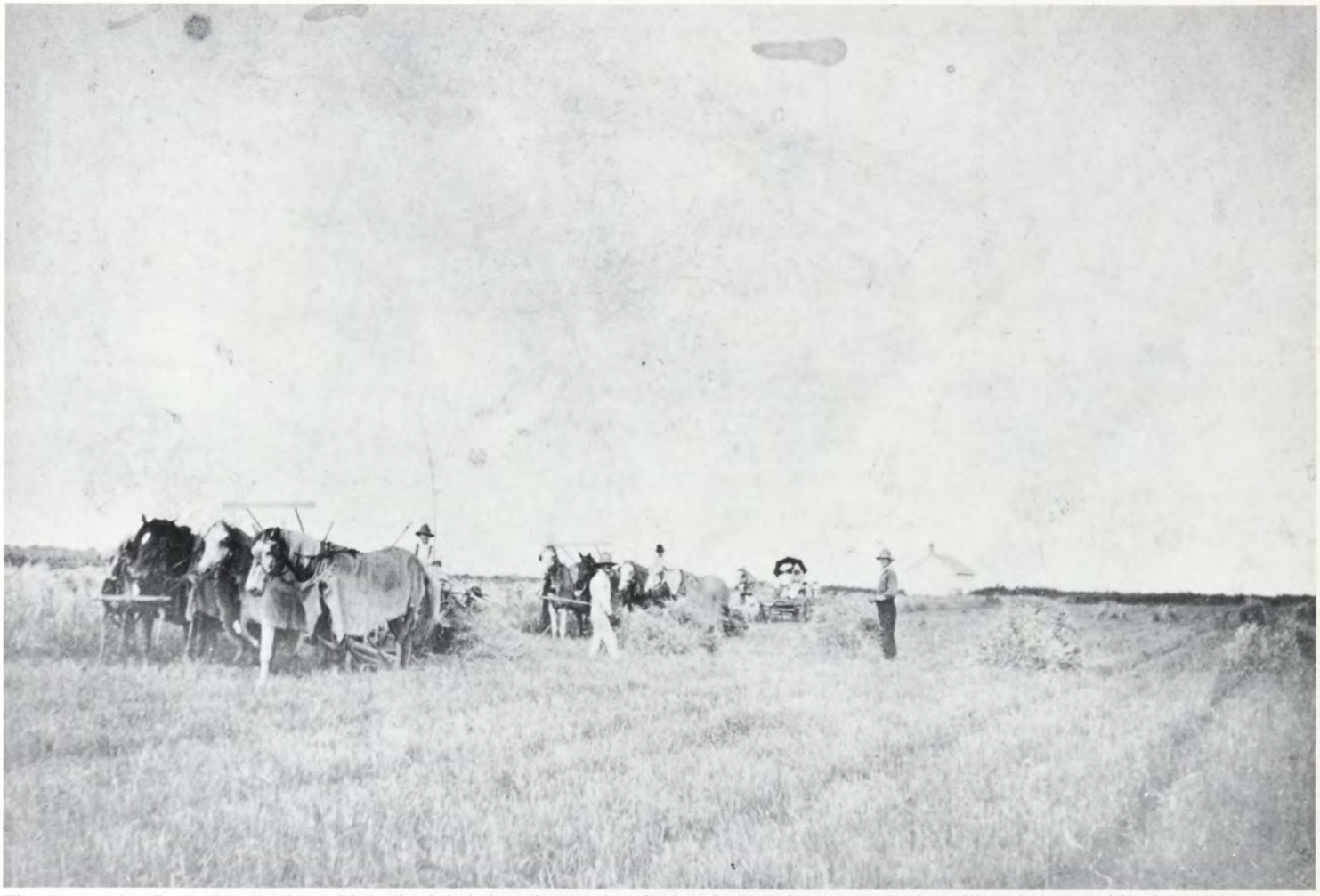
According to Harvey, his father was a "well-liked man" whose favorite past-time was "visiting his neighbors." He never went anywhere without his derby hat. He was noted for grandiose ideas, most of which seldom got beyond the planning stage. One that did succeed, however, was the selling of popcorn fritters, which cleared $1,200 in a season. His sense of humor and charity were well-known. He held duck races for Perry's Beach visitors. Ducks would be released from the shore and swimmers would try to catch them. Winners took their catches home. Of William, Harvey said:

> He loved children and whenever he would take off in his truck for short trips, he would fill it with his own [kids], plus the neighbor kids. He often took us to see the horse races at Como Park, the ski slides in north Minneapolis, and to the train station when the circus came to town.

Kenneth Gregson, whose letters were a help to Gene Skiba in his writing of *A Centennial History of New Brighton, Minnesota,* sums up William Perry by saying, "He was the greatest humanitarian around. Any person needing help got it from Bill."

Through the three Perry men, the Perry name has become part of Ramsey County's heritage.

Patrick R. Martin is a graduate of Mankato State University and a direct descendant of Abraham Perry.



The Davern family working in the field north of their farm house, late in the nineteenth century. Today, this field is a residential neighborhood southwest of Montreal and Snelling avenues. See the article page 22 on the families and the homes of the Daverns, who were among the Irish immigrants who settled in what is now Highland Park in 1849, and on the Colvins who followed them.

R.C.H.S.
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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102